

Philip Lesly

Coping with Opposition Groups

EDITOR'S NOTE: When *Public Relations Review* was founded in 1975, we said it should be a "bridge" between the academic worlds of theory and research and the professional worlds of the public relations practitioner.

So it has been our policy to publish both articles of original research by scholars, and thoughtful, serious discussions of public relations problems by the wise professionals in our field. We have been leading recent issues with such pieces, and would like to encourage leaders in the field to submit articles of this nature to us: not how-to-do-it pieces, nor self-promotional efforts, nor Rotary Club speeches, but thoughtful analyses of the profession.

Phil Lesly's piece here is a good example. In addition to being a long-time practitioner and president of his own firm, Lesly has been a prolific writer. His latest book is *Lesly's Handbook of Public Relations and Communications* (Chicago, IL: Probus Publishing, 1991, fourth edition).

Opposition to organizations comes in many forms; but coping with them generally requires expertness in five areas:

1. Knowing the situation and the climate.
2. Knowing your people.
3. Knowing your adversaries.

4. Knowing what to do.
5. Knowing how to do it.

1. KNOW THE SITUATION AND THE CLIMATE

Most of what I have to say deals with specifics and detailed recommendations. But first we need to look at where opposition comes from and how to understand it.

Previous to this generation, society was organized around strong centralized authority in all institutions, organizations, governments and other groups. Now it is diffused among nebulous attitudes of millions of individuals. And it is exerted through thousands of groups that constantly shift.

In every society there has been a social contract, whereby structures have had the power to define the limits of acceptable actions; and those living within the structures have accepted those limits as a sort of absolutism that holds them together. In that way those outside the group are held at bay, the uncertainties of multiple anarchies within the group are avoided and the corrosion of uncertainty is alleviated.

All that has changed. A whole flood of forces became active. Each was potent in itself. By interacting with each other they forced each factor to change more rapidly and to alter its effect.

Probably never have so many altering forces been active at the same time. Any one of them would cause the social fabric to be transformed. All of them together pull that fabric in many directions simultaneously. And each of the forces works on all the others, modifying its nature and impact.

We have moved in just a few years from a power structure that seemed too rigid to adjust to new conditions, to where all leadership has great difficulty setting directions or preventing disruption.

Now those who defy authority disclaim any responsibility for their insurgence; and it is the established institution that needs means to defend itself.

Together these forces add up to a new milieu in which events are determined not by powerful leaders but by the human climate—the mass of attitudes among groups of people that determines how all institutions and organizations can function.

The human climate has become as important in determining how organizations can function as the natural climate is for the farmer.

2. KNOW YOUR PEOPLE

This switch from power centered in organizations and institutions to power focused among various groups of people has transformed the requirements for leadership of organizations.

The greatest strength of the masterly manager is discipline of mind. He or she focuses on the facts and the realities, not letting loose ends or fuzzy sentiments take the eye off the solid goal. This precise mind made necessary the computer, which reasons through the use of numbers; and the numbers of the computer become the touchstone of reality. In this logic, if it can't be tabulated, it "doesn't add up" and so is given little attention.

However, these requirements are being changed by imprecise elements that can't be counted, plotted or tracked—the attitudes of people. Public attitudes are causing managers of all kinds of organizations and institutions their greatest troubles.

For a number of reasons, the shifting of gears has been slow and marked by grinding resistance among managers.

- The demands were new and unexpected.
- The new demands are outside of the organization. External forces are "externalities"—outside nuisances—until they gum up the machinery.
- They are opposite to the standards of the disciplined mind, which expects everything to have its place and to perform, like a scientific process, as it's supposed to perform.
- They call for sharing hard-earned power and catering to those whom he or she has risen above in the competition for success and stature.
- They add several stages to the process of reaching decisions, and then to the process of getting things done. It's not "efficient."
- At the same time that they slow things up, they are propelled by instant communication. The old privilege of reaching decisions after studied consideration is shattered.
- Leaders are the winners in the human competition. Winners are busy. But those people they consider to be the losers have lots of time and energy.

3. KNOW YOUR ADVERSARIES

Existence of insurgence against leadership not only is not new, it is built into the human psyche. It is not a nuisance that will go away "when things return to normal" or "when we get over this crazy period we're in."

A common mistake is assuming that all those who oppose an institution are alike and should be dealt with in the same way. That comes from the penchant for classifying things and putting labels on them. Sizing up one person is difficult; categorizing large numbers of them is folly.

Most activists can be described as being one of these five types:

1. Sincere people with a clear purpose that frankly reflects their rights or interests.
2. Do-gooders who are comfortable and usually affluent. They seek an outlet for their purposefulness in helping others or in making things fit their theories of life.
3. Social engineers who consider themselves intellectually and morally the cream of society and are intent on imposing their superior judgment onto the entire human system.
4. The holier-than-thou who feel that heaven has anointed them with the one true formula for human existence and that it is their duty to impose it on everyone else.
5. "Anti's," who are against almost everything, constantly dissatisfied with their lives and the world.

The diversity of this grouping makes it clear that no single approach can satisfy the urgings of most opponents.

There are other ways in which opponents fall into a wide range of classifications. Probably the most important is their motivations, which spring from many different causes.

Here are five main classifications based on the *personality* of those included:

1. *Advocates* are people who propose something they believe in, such as a reduction in emissions of carbon dioxide.
2. *Dissidents* are against many things because it is their character to be sour on things as they are.
3. *Activists* want to get something done or something changed.
4. *Zealots* may have some traits of the others, but they are distinguished by their overriding singlemindedness.
5. *Fanatics* are zealots with their stabilizers removed.

Fanatical terrorists are a problem outside the scope of other considerations. Protection against them calls for police and military authority.

Dealing with the other four types requires being sensitive to the psyche of the people involved.

Clearly, the means used to deal with an advocate will be futile with a zealot. Logic, persuasion, seeking agreements based on mutual compromise—all of these are based on a reasonable desire to resolve the matter and go on to other things. To the zealot there are no other things; his or her issue is the predominant matter in life.

On the other hand, to treat an advocate in the same way one treats a zealot results in creating hatred where none existed. The basis for dealing with reasonable people is reason. The way to overcome zealots is to wither away the support they depend on.

The differences between these personalities account for much of the splintering that goes on constantly in various movements. Zealots and activists become impatient with the impassionate approach of advocates and break away. Then the zealots tend to find the activists are not "dedicated" enough because they have concern for other issues or for the consequences of their actions.

Opposition groups are not random assemblies any more than are universities, businesses, armies or congregations. When the genesis of the group can be understood on the basis of what brought it together *besides the issue in question*, you are a long way toward knowing how to deal with it.

Constituencies of opposition movements often have one predominant root, such as race or religion. It may be location, such as a given community or parents with children in a specific school.

An identification that can mislead is ideology. People marching against a nuclear power plant will include not only those concerned with safety but those who see a chance to cripple the economic system and make it easier prey for socialism.

To understand opponents and think clearly about dealing with them requires a penetrating understanding of where they come from.

Growth of the number of activist protesters and the number of causes they espouse is now built into our system. Millions of people have been educated to think they should have a special role in our society. Colleges proffer degrees as freedom from routine roles and marks of leadership (even while they propound "equality" for everyone). Only a few find they can attain dreamed-of influence. The world won't bow to their wisdom. Disillusion sets in.

As Eric Hoffer said: "There is nothing more explosive than a skilled population condemned to inaction." The problem is most acute among those educated faster than they can be absorbed: blacks, some women and social-science majors.

Those led to expect great things seek to justify themselves. They're disappointed with their small roles; so they have the time, the inclination and the opportunity to attack the structure.

No system will ever absorb a near-majority of people expecting to be leaders; so we are developing a whole society of bored and frustrated people. They will spend their time trying to force change . . . and when change comes, it will suit only a few, so most will be constantly pressing for other changes.

While on most issues many of the opponents are clear-thinking and reasonable, there is also a large number who are not. Ironically, they are products of the progress that has been made in almost all aspects of society during their lifetime. So many problems have been alleviated into near invisibility that these people now have become perfectionists. If there is a sign that something is short of perfect, they feel it must be condemned. They consider it reasonable to demand 100

percent purity of all bodies of water (which nature has never achieved); pollution levels for cars beyond practical technology (while they drive their own polluting cars to protest rallies); and regulations for product safety that would outlaw the match if it were introduced today (while in their work they resent efforts to raise standards of performance).

They epitomize a new psychological syndrome that can be expressed: "*You* have to be coerced; leave *me* alone."

They not only want perfect conditions but they want them to come easily. The easy answer, however, comes to them most probably from outside established authority. Reports in the popular press of miracle cures speed through the public; cautious studies about cures that may prove solid in a few years, after careful testing, are all but ignored. Ideas are accepted today, among such people, in inverse ratio to the ideas' identification with centers of authority. They are most likely to catch on (for a while) if they come from somewhere within the public itself—or seem to.

4. KNOW WHAT TO DO

Competition is necessary for any person or organization to function at its best. Competition of ideas is a stimulus of judgment and a monitor of effectiveness. Accordingly, a basic rule in assessing opponents is: Allow room for normal expression of opinions and criticisms; provide for free interchange. The role of the individual and groups of individuals is now a must. If exchange of opinion and suggestions is free, and if the tone is kept unheated so logic can prevail, the best of combined thinking is likely to prevail in the long run.

Another rule is: Listen—they may have something to offer. Widespread education and freedom to express oneself have made millions of people capable of making worthwhile suggestions—even if they start as criticisms.

A third rule is: If a group has legitimate arguments and shows it has a sound approach, enlist its leaders. Often they will make great contributions as employees. They might be retained as consultants. Or they may become active in a new working group you set up jointly.

The Nixon White House demonstrated how deluded and even deranged a closed atmosphere can make the most powerful office. Many large corporations that are struggling through the '90s listened only to their own circle of like-minded executives in the '80s.

That syndrome was explained by Dr. David G. Myers, a noted expert on intergroup relations:

...like-minded people increasingly associate with each other as a conflict evolves, amplifying their shared tendencies Discussion generally strengthens the average inclination held by group members before the discussion.

It is precisely when outside measures are building against the practices of an organization that it most needs the thinking of intelligent outside people.

Few situations threaten the very existence of an organization and require a fixed position. Therefore, an *objective* reading of the climate can determine what the consequences will be of various courses: adamantness, modification, coalition, conciliation or capitulation.

So a key question that must be asked when confronted with an opposing group whose case has merit—or that has such strong public support that it is unassailable at this time—is: How far should we go to accommodate? Then these questions should follow:

- What are *your* options?
- What are *their* options?
- Who has viewpoints *different* from those of the activists? These fall into two main categories: those who share the organization's views closely, and those who don't but who differ with the activists for other reasons. Both can become your allies.
- Who offers *accepted avenues* for free discussion?

In seeking to modify the climate in which an issue is being considered, it is vital to recognize that *it is not necessary to override the charges or claims of the dissidents*. The first need is to prevent an imbalance, in which the preponderant impressions on the issue are coming from the opponents. People generally do not favor action on a non-alarming situation when arguments seem to be balanced on both sides and there is a clear doubt.

The weight of impressions on the public must be balanced so people will have doubts and lack motivation to take action. Accordingly, means are needed to get balancing information into the stream from sources that the public will find credible. There is no need for a clear-cut "victory." In fact, a victory can backfire by providing the opponents with a rallying point. The organization is being attacked in an effort to force undesired change. Nurturing public doubts by demonstrating that this is not a clear-cut situation in support of the opponents usually is all that is necessary.

Can they be diverted elsewhere?

How can you gain the momentum? When opponents gain the initiative in setting the agenda they not only get the massive advantage of imprinting the "cause" first and firmly. They also put whoever is being criticized into a defensive position. The defense has to undo the first impression and seems always to be saying, "But that's not true; listen to us!" In an age of electronic immediacy and visual impact, having always to *react* to others' initiatives is to seem *reactionary*. A defensive position is therefore a position of weakness—in tactics and in the eyes of the people.

That shows the importance of detecting when an issue is likely to be put forward and being prepared with the facts and sound arguments *before* the charges splash onto the agenda.

The basic process required includes these steps:

1. Have an information-detecting function always operating to detect *in advance* what some activist group may bring forth.
2. Have the facts scrupulously researched and documented in advance—on every subject that the monitoring process flushes out.
3. Learn all about the group that is germinating the issue.
4. Inoculate the channels of influence against readily accepting what the activists will charge. Watch for the “movement” to come into the open. Then immediately provide facts, perspective and implications. Especially spell out the consequences of allowing the activists’ position to prevail.
5. Become the dependable source of information at the *formation* stage of awareness.
6. Set up scenarios on what the opponents are likely to do. Try to be prepared for all of them.
7. Determine who else has a viewpoint opposed to the activists.
8. Get those who have reason to oppose the activists to join in helping set the agenda.
9. Keep your eye on the key goal: Prevent your foes from setting and keeping the agenda. Make the agenda cover the *full* scope of the subject: People are not likely to take sides when there is no clear-cut side to take.

The role of the media, of course, is vital.

There are a number of things an organization can do to optimize the treatment it receives:

1. Assess the media that will be involved with your organization and issues likely to face it.
2. When a new issue seems to be emerging, assess each medium in terms of how it is likely to treat it.
3. Establish accessibility *in advance* to the key gatekeepers of news coverage at each medium.
4. Humanize your organization. Let the media get to know and respect people rather than try to have them deal with an institution.

5. Seed the flow of information on the emerging issue in advance. Develop and distribute authoritative, sound, fair material on the subject that is better than anyone else can produce.
6. Become the key reliable source on the subject.
7. Establish visibility. Do things about the subject in question that command respectful attention.
8. Hold media people responsible for what they report.

Major attention should be focused on the “swing” portion of the public being addressed. On almost any issue the range of attitudes tends to follow a bell curve. At each extreme there is a small group of perhaps 5 percent who are entrenched in their views. Perhaps 40 percent on each side of the spectrum are apathetic on that issue. That leaves perhaps 10 percent who are in the swing group—those who take an active interest in the subject and are open-minded. Whichever viewpoint has a majority of that 10 percent leaning toward it tends to prevail in the climate of attitudes on that subject. *A swing of 2 or 3 percent among that group can reverse the leanings of the total.*

5. KNOW HOW TO DO IT

Here are guidelines for carrying out the function of coping with opponents:

- Appoint to the board of directors at least one member who has strong orientation toward public attitudes.
- Have a key executive on the staff who has a strong background in public relations and public affairs.
- Establish a process for monitoring what is developing among the publics that may have an impact on the organization.
- Establish liaison with public-interest groups and the public.
- Get the highest caliber of input from one or more experts outside the organization.
- Set up a process for watching the general media to see what subjects arise and show signs of becoming issues.
- Establish liaison with all media that may be interested in topics of concern to the organization.
- Set up guidelines and procedures to make leaders of the organization accessible and knowledgeable for the media.

And of course it is essential to use the most effective communications techniques after all the analysis, strategy and planning. Those are a major topic in themselves, to be covered in another article or in any number of books. This is one of the most vital yet scarcest of all the skills.

Leaders of organizations have responsibilities—to those who employ or elect them, to their staffs, their communities, their profession, their country. They are responsible for maintaining and advancing the organization's ability to fulfill its functions. That means they must assume the responsibility for maintaining stability while evolving and improving. An evolving and improving organism cannot be bettered by being deconstructed.

So today it is a primary responsibility of the executive to thwart those pressures for change that are unsound, impassioned, misguided, based on cupidity or otherwise inadvisable—and to overcome that kind of opposition.

It is a matter of survival—for each organization and for our society that is built on the effective functioning of the organizations and institutions that comprise it.